



hero

JOAN DIDION WRITER

Joan Didion is in the air. But there hasn't been a time in the last forty years when she wasn't. From the publication of her first novel in the early sixties to the release of her latest book, *Political Fictions* [Knopf], this fall, Didion (a great beauty seen on her dust jackets smoking too many cigarettes or wearing giant black sunglasses) has emerged as a literary pioneer. Her sharp, spare prose and journalism gave voice to an uncertain America spinning off its axis.

But it's not enough merely to refer to Didion as "a writer's writer," nor adequate to say she simply had the gift of being in the right place at the right time—even though she is and she does. Didion has in fact defined the past half century in all of its fears and panics, obsessions and cover-ups. Moreover, it's almost impossible ever to feel like you've totally "gotten" her. In the eleven books she's published, Didion has changed her style and subjects repeatedly. Here is the young *Vogue* editor, who lived New York City moment to moment until those moments blew up; the incisive journalist, who captured the breakdown of American adolescence in an investigation of hippies on Haight-Ashbury; the raw novelist, who plotted the slow decline of an aging actress in *Play It As It Lays*; the Los Angeles essayist, who recorded her meetings with Janis Joplin, The Doors, Nancy Reagan, and a decadent Hollywood elite running straight into the path of the Manson murders. Yet there is also the Joan Didion who exposed the horrors of upheaval in El Salvador and the American foreign policy that only encouraged the brutality; the Joan Didion who turned the infamous Central Park-jogger rape into a litmus test for New York's political and social failures; the Joan Didion who, most recently, depicted the dangerous game of Washington politics, as democracy slips slowly by the wayside.

Simply put, Didion is a writer to be trusted. Her prose may be so skillfully crafted that it reads like poetry, but falling into the worlds she documents is (to quote her completely out of context) "to open the door to the stranger and find that the stranger did indeed have the knife." Okay, enough fawning. Since Didion is the ultimate hero, I met with her in her sunny Upper East Side apartment to take a few minutes of her time.

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN When I was thinking up questions to ask you, I realized that what I really wanted to do was to read to you all of my favorite passages from your books. But that's probably not very interesting for you.

JOAN DIDION [Laughs.]

CB So you published your first novel, *Run River*, in 1963, after you lived in New York...

JD I had been working at *Vogue*, so I was writing this novel at night and sometimes during the day at work, too, actually [laughs]. I came to New York straight out of college and started this novel a year or two after that, except I couldn't even think of it as a novel. I was just writing little bits, because I was too traumatized as an English major to imagine I could write something as big as that. I wrote these little bits, and I started stringing them together. I think it took me four years to write half of it. And then I got an advance on it—nothing, probably like \$1,500—but it was enough for me to assume I could take a leave of absence and go home to Sacramento to finish it. I finished it in three weeks.

CB Three weeks?

JD Sometimes, if you've gotten away and you're totally focused and half of it is already there, then the rest of it just goes. When I first finished it, it was in a much different form than it was when it was finally published. It was much more shattered in the time sequences, but I didn't know how to do that well enough to make that very convincing. So during the editorial process, I straightened it out a great deal. I just read it recently, and I was amazed by how unshattered it was. It's basically one straight flashback.

CB Did your editor make you change it?

JD It was a joint decision. I wanted the novel to be publishable, and the publisher didn't think it was publishable in this weird form. The answer was to learn how to do it better.

CB What do you think when you look back on those times? So much is said in your essay "Goodbye to All That" about being young and living in New York and growing tired of it. At one point, you say that New York is a "city only for the very young." From that essay, it seemed like you would never return. Why did you move back?

JD We [Didion and her husband, John Gregory Dunne] moved back to New York in 1988, because it seemed like a good time to shake up our lives a little bit. We were living in Brentwood Park. It was so comfortable that I could see myself...

CB ...living in Brentwood Park forever.

JD [Laughs.] Exactly. We wanted to make some changes, to make life a little harder for a minute.

CB How do you feel about New York the first time versus living here now?

JD It's a totally different experience. I was making \$45 dollars a week then. I think the most I ever made was not quite \$10,000 a year. New York can be very glamorous, but it was seen through a window, you know. I remember walking home from the office—I lived here on the Upper East Side, all of those beautiful houses in the 60s—and looking in the windows, and there were people in uniforms cooking and feeding children, and I thought, I can never have a real life like this.

CB I can relate.

JD So when I got to Los Angeles, it felt like a great rift from that difficult way of life. Coming back now is different. I'm not that same yearning person I once was. Exactly, or sort of, or so I tell myself.

CB Well, in that time you've done a lot of writing, and not just in one area. I mean, you've worked in personal essay, fiction, screenplays, journalism...

JD I started doing those personal essays for *Vogue* before I did my first novel. I started doing them because the magazine had a piece that had been assigned, and the title was on the cover...and it didn't come in! But the cover had already been printed, so I wrote it, and then I did several others. And the way they were done was that the cover line would be devised, and I would write the piece off of that.

CB Were any of those early essays in your first collection, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*?

JD One of those *Vogue* pieces was in there. "On Self-Respect."

CB Do you think you'll ever go back to writing such intensely personal essays again?

JD No, I don't think so. When you do that personal stuff, the image of yourself, the one you give to the world, is in some way frozen. It's just there. I wanted to evolve from that.

CB You didn't want to be monitoring yourself at all times for an essay.

JD Exactly. Except, actually, now I am writing something rather personal. I'm doing a book about California, and it's turned out to take much more personal turns than I thought it would.

CB California as it is now?

JD No. California the idea in itself.

CB How did you get involved in journalism? I know you wrote at *Vogue*, but it's not the kind of journalism that's in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* or *The White Album*, is it?

JD No [laughs]. I think I was good at counting characters at *Vogue*. I could really do a caption.

CB So how did your writing swerve from making a caption to ultimately doing pieces on subjects like Hollywood just before the Manson murders, Georgia O'Keeffe, or a housewife on trial for killing her husband?

JD After we got married and just before we moved to California, John was working for *Time*, and I was still working part-time for *Vogue* and was trying to start a second novel, not very successfully. And we decided to move to California for six months. The idea was that we could support ourselves by writing for television, which was a total fantasy. We would go see story editors, and they would tell us the formula. We sat in one office, and the story editor—the show was *Bonanza*—said, "The basic formula for this show is break a leg at the Ponderosa." And I said, "Excuse me?" He had to explain that in every episode, some stranger, someone not in the regular cast, in essence breaks a leg at the Ponderosa. We never actually...well, I think we did one story eventually that got picked up by one show. But we had to support ourselves, you see. So we talked to *The Saturday Evening Post* and started doing occasional pieces for them, and then at one point, we wrote pretty regularly for them, until they folded. They were very open at that time to whatever you wanted to do. A lot of people had a lot of fun working on pieces for them.

CB Did you come up with most of the ideas for those pieces, or were they assigned?

JD I came up with all of the ideas except one: "Goodbye to All That." They had a theme issue, and the theme was love. So I decided to write about a place I loved: the New York.

CB So it was you who thought of going up to San Francisco in the sixties and hanging around Haight-Ashbury and doing a piece on the hippies there?

JD Oh, yes. That was my idea.

CB The essay on hippies, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," put you on the map for the "new" reporting style you became famous for. Do you feel it's held up over time? Have your feelings about your works changed?

JD Yeah. You always think you could do it better now. And you probably could, because you get more proficient. When my last novel was published, *The Last Thing He Wanted*, in 1996, I was on a talk-radio show in San Francisco. Someone called in who had been one of the characters, as it were, in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." All the names had been changed of course, but she was one of the people I wrote about. She said she had been very upset when it was published and thought that I had been very unfair. But as time went by, she reread it and changed her mind. It was interesting because when you finish a piece, you tend to think that everyone is stuck in time, that you are the only one walking away from it. But several times in the past five or six years I learned something about people I had written about in the sixties, which is a very strange sensation.

CB Before you started, did you know the way you wanted to write "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" and the spin you

wanted it to have?

JD I didn't know how to go about writing that piece. Basically, I had written down my notes, and I didn't have a clue how to organize it or where to go with it. Finally, I just put it down as my notes with a little polishing.

CB So it's a bit wandering. A lot of your characters in your early work have that quality of the wanderer, the character moving through experiences. And so many of those experiences are attached to key points in history. In *The White Album*, for example, you make a sharp critique of the women's movement of the late seventies. Do you feel any different about feminism today?

JD I think that piece was about a specific moment in time. I thought the women's movement was becoming mired in the trivial, that it was going in a direction that wasn't the ideal direction, that it had hit a wall and kept talking about small things. Trivialization wore itself out, though, and the movement managed to survive, not so much as a movement anymore, but as a changed way of life.

CB Are you glad you spent so much time in and on California?

JD Well, I'm from there. And I love Los Angeles. I didn't even realize how much I loved it until we moved back here. We moved here in April '88, and in June, I went back on a campaign plane for the California primaries. And I thought I had never seen anything more beautiful. I was simply in tears the whole way. We were on a bus going from the airport to a rally. It was sunset and incredible, and it was South Central L.A., which is not famous for that sort of thing.

CB You present a different Los Angeles in *The White Album*, where you recount Janis Joplin showing up at one of your parties, and Jim Morrison in the recording studio, and the fact that you and Roman Polanski are godparents to the same child. And then, of course, the Manson murders occurred. You write, "There were rumors, there were stories. Everything was unmentionable but nothing was unimaginable."

JD The Manson murders ended the sixties in Hollywood. I don't know if Hollywood changed, but the mood of it did.

CB You and your husband have careers writing screenplays [*Panic in Needle Park*, *A Star Is Born*, *Up Close and Personal*]. Do you feel differently about Hollywood since you left L.A.?

JD We don't have a different relationship to it, but the business has changed so much. It costs so much more to make movies, so now there is so much more risk involved. Many years go by on a project before you actually start shooting, so it's a different kind of development process. There was a point when we first started writing pictures where we could pretty much do two or three drafts before shooting. Now, we are talking years of drafts. It's a little bit frustrating, because a whole lot of what you do if you work in the business is to work on things that aren't immediately going to be made. Actually, what we'd rather do are rewrites. Even if you had nothing to do with the picture before you were hired to punch it up, you know it is going to shoot two weeks from Tuesday.

CB You're still working on movies?

JD Yes, but not right now. John is trying to finish his novel, and I'm working on the California book and have *Political Fictions* coming out. But we worked pretty steadily in the picture business all last year, and we still haven't seen any of it on film.

CB I loved your piece on the 1988 Writers' Guild strike in your book *After Henry*. Did writers rally around you? Do you think the piece had some impact on Hollywood and the way writers are treated?

JD I don't think anything changed. There was a horrible story I heard just after that last strike in May almost happened. The president of the Writers' Guild, John Wells, who is a television producer and a writer (all television producers are writers, and thus, he's in the Guild) is the coproducer of *West Wing*. Just after the strike, *West Wing* told all of its writers that their contracts would not be picked up for the next year because their contracts involved a raise. However, they would be delighted to have them stay on without a raise.

CB How sweet!

JD For the president of the Writers' Guild to do that is really astonishing.

CB One major theme running through your work is the concept of "the story," the narrative we construct out of disparate events that may or may not add up. In *The White Album*, you write that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live." On the other hand, you have a book like *Salvador*, on a country then in the grips of a horrible civil war, which really seems to wipe fictions out.

JD I think I wrote *Salvador* out of a sheer sense of shock.

CB The writing is different in that book.

JD Yes. It is very straightforward. I went down there because I was reading the paper one morning, and it was one of those things where you couldn't add up what was being said.

CB That happens a lot when reading the paper.

JD Yeah. I was writing *Democracy* and having a really hard time. I said to John, This might be worth a trip. So we went. We were plunged into this other world. Then I got home and did a lot more reading on it, trying to figure out what we saw when we were there. But it was very straightforward and very quickly written. We went down in June of '82, and it was running in *The New York Review* in November, and then published in April as a book. So it was ten months from the time it was conceived to the time it was brought to press. For writing, it's a short time.

CB The way you piece together your stories, you must read every paper, have an amazing memory, and own some sort of elaborate file cabinet. I wonder how you go about pulling these disparate sources together.

JD I put stuff in boxes, and I save newspapers. I stack them up in the dining room, I'm afraid, when I'm working on a piece. And then what happens usually is that I go through all of the papers to find the quote I want, and I can't find it, so I end up taking it off the Net.

CB So you use the Internet?

JD I'm on and off a couple times in every sentence.

DSL changed my whole method of working.

CB Your work has definitely shifted in style.

JD I started using a computer in 1987. It seems to me that it made me more logical; I never saw myself as very logical. And there was something about the logic of DOS. I was learning on DOS, not Windows. It was so inexorable. If something didn't work, if something went wrong, it was your fault. WordPerfect was word perfect. You couldn't beat them. It did for me what geometry was supposed to have done.

CB Are you glad for that change? Do you like the logic of those pieces that you couldn't have done before?

JD I simply couldn't have done them before the computer. It makes writing a little harder, a little less showy, and I think it probably makes it smarter. Or maybe I just have to think this way [laughs].

CB In *Political Fictions*, you take on so many recent political events, from 1988 to the 2000 election. The media and the politicians are at the center, as an elite political class moving far away from the minds of the voters. Do you think there is any solution?

JD I don't know exactly how, but in essence I think you have to keep telling that story, pushing that stone up the hill, even if no one appears to be listening. After a while, you really start feeling like a nag, because you are always reminding people what got said yesterday, which seems to vanish. No one seems to remember what got said yesterday.

CB I almost feel like the essays in the new book are lessons in good reading, the ability to read and remember and make connections between different pieces of information. It's an active way of reading culture.

JD The ability to read actively is atrophying pretty fast. Opinion plays far too big a role, opinion and attitude. This is certainly encouraged by cable, 24-7 MSNBC, etc. Certainly that encourages the shouting of opinion rather than an open discussion and bringing something true to the table. But I don't think the media are totally to blame for this.

CB I was always interested in the fact that you worked in Hollywood and then in politics. Do you see any corollary from your time spent in movies to the political episodes of Clinton and Bush? The smoke and mirrors and illusion-making effects?

JD No, that never struck me. Hollywood is in some way like Washington in that they're both company towns. Except Hollywood in a lot of ways is a lot smarter and funnier and more entertaining. Not Washington's idea of smarter, really, but...[laughs].

CB Have you experienced a lot of criticism for your take on Clinton's impeachment—that it was a moralistic outcry on the part of politicians and media makers, whose views were at odds with those of a largely indifferent general public—or from the people you mention in those essays?

JD Not from the people I talk about in there. Not yet. But I expect I will. A lot of times when those pieces were published, friends would get in arguments with me.

CB There seemed to be a shift in your feelings about Clinton over the course of *Political Fictions*.

JD I don't think I realized how effective he would be in the role of the president. I think I underestimated his talent at getting in touch with people. I think he was somebody who was blessed with his enemies [laughs].

CB How do you feel about the Democratic and Republican parties now?

JD I think they are both stuck in exactly the same place. The only people they are speaking to are a tiny group of most-likely voters. I think both parties like it that way, because they can basically control this horrible game. If you can reduce the electorate to only people who respond to certain cues, you have a bigger chance of controlling the election.

CB The truths that come out of *Political Fictions* are frightening.

JD It's kind of restful to go to another country sometimes and find discourse on a different level, not so angry. Actually, we were in Honolulu for two weeks, and I didn't read a paper. I read the *Honolulu Advertiser* and the *Times* fax. The *Times* fax gave me all the news, but I didn't watch news on television. We were both quite exhausted, and it was the most restful two weeks. I came back kind of interested in reading a paper, which was not the case before I left.

CB Do you think you'll write another novel?

JD Yeah, I'll work on another novel. I always hate to start a novel, because it requires such concentration. To start a novel is like knowing that you're going to undergo chemotherapy. This is not going to be a good experience. It's going to be okay when I finish, but...

CB How do you start a novel?

JD I use notes. I keep a box full of odd things that, for some reason, I think there might be something there for me. When I'm ready to start, I go through that box and make notes and try to work out a story. And then maybe I write a couple of pages, then set it aside. And then try to see where it goes. It's kind of a tricky thing in the beginning, because according to the rules that I have for myself, you have to use everything you put down. I don't mean you have to use it in that form. Let's say you put something down on the Brinks robbery, then that has to figure.

CB There seems to be a growing "cult of Joan Didion" among young readers.

JD You think so?

CB Definitely. I keep hearing your name mentioned, and more and more people talking about your books and referencing them in articles, and I know that authors like Bret Easton Ellis and Dave Eggers have really gleaned a lot from your writing. Looking back on your books, do you have a favorite?

JD I like *Democracy*, which was not fun to write at all. Usually, novels appear to you right at the end. That one never did. In fact, I didn't really finish. I sort of abandoned it. I never

got that elation near the end. Usually, if it works well, it's like a big high. You can't think of anything else. But that one, I could think about everything else in the world. In fact, three days before I finished, I was weeping, saying I would abandon it. But looking back, I really like it. I like *The Last Thing He Wanted*, too, because it is totally plot. That was the intention of that story. I wrote it in a very short time to keep the plot straight.

CB How do you feel about *Play It As It Lays*?

JD That seems like a long time ago. Also, it doesn't seem like it has that many layers. Not enough. It's not really a novel, it's more of a novella.

CB But it has your signature sparse language and style.

JD Yeah, but in a lot of ways, that language became other people's language, too. So it doesn't read to me as specifically mine. I know that the day I finished *Play It As It Lays*, I immediately felt marvelous. In other words, I managed to depress myself in the act of writing that book.

CB Did you feel a bit like the main character, Maria Wyeth?

JD I always put myself into the mind of that person at some level.

CB Before you had written a novel, when you were living here in New York, which writers did you look up to? You were an English major, after all.

JD That's what the problem was. I had become convinced in college that there was no reason to write, that no one could balance a sentence the way Henry James did, that no one could ever do intercutting the way Flaubert did, so why bother?

CB Sometimes, for a writer, I think you need some distance from that hard academia, to find your own thing...

JD And not be under that. I remember I had a big argument in 1975, when I went back to Berkeley to teach a special one-semester course. I had dinner one night with some people in the department, and we got into an argument about Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*. One person was saying what a piece of trash it was, and I said, "I don't think we do know that because we don't have the finished novel here." He said, "Well, we've got his notes." [Laughs.] For everyone else at the table, the notes and the existing fragments constituted a failed book.

CB That doesn't even allow the writer to write it. Do you do a lot of rewriting?

JD Yeah. And I'm sure Fitzgerald did too.

CB He also took a long time with those books. I think *Tender Is the Night* was a five-year ordeal.

JD I always thought *The Last Tycoon* was going to end up being about Cecilia Brady and not the protagonist, Monroe Stahr. It's got some great stuff in it. Cecilia Brady says at one point, "We don't go for strangers in Hollywood." That's the best characterization of Hollywood I've ever read.

CB You used that in one of your essays, didn't you?

JD Yes.

CB In an issue of *Vogue* last year, there was an article you wrote on being an assistant editor there, a personal essay about it.

JD Oh, that piece on Irving Penn.

CB And I was amazed by your ability to capture a feeling after so many years being away from it.

JD I literally did remember Penn's photo of the Tai Chi movements as if it did really involve every member of the New York Ballet Company.

CB When you write, do you push your own subjects, or do people come up with stories for you?

JD Sometimes people suggest, but I almost never end up doing that. If it's something I have a feeling about, I usually go ahead.

CB For example, the Central Park-jogger rape essay, "Sentimental Journeys," which appeared in *After Henry*...

JD That was my idea. We had been living in New York a couple years at that point, and I realized I wasn't reporting it, I wasn't involving myself with anything here, I wasn't getting it. I was like a visitor from Europe. So I decided I would do a series of pieces on New York. I started doing the jogger and got into so much stuff in that one long piece that I didn't need to do the rest of them.

CB That essay blew me away. You were able to take so many pieces and factors of New York. Even seemingly small details, like why domestic garbage disposals were illegal, were so indicative of the bureaucracy of New York. I love that when you called up to ask why garbage disposals are illegal, the New York sanitation office actually said, "Because people will try to put their babies down them."

JD Garbage disposals are now legal, you know.

CB Well, we have one at work, and after reading that piece, I thought, Should I report this?

JD I know. I used to be on the board of our building, and we got an alteration application, which included a garbage disposal. And the superintendent said, "Oh no, we can't approve this," and I said, "Why can't we approve this? They're legal now." [Laughs.]

CB Do you think you'll write on New York anymore?

JD Maybe.

CB Giuliani and the new mayor situation?

JD No.

CB Just California for the moment. Whenever I read your California pieces, I get a vicarious nostalgia for that place.

JD Oh, are you from there?

CB No. I'm from Ohio, but I spent some months in Los Angeles a few years back.

JD Well, it takes two years to get it. I found that out when we moved there. I was driving down the Harbor Freeway one day, and it finally clicked, and then there was nothing else.

Joan Didion in 1964, by the gatehouse she lived in at Portuguese Bend, on the Palos Verdes peninsula, in California.

PHOTOGRAPHY DOMINICK DUNNE